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FM AMEMBASSY RANGOON
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RUCNASE/ASEAN MEMBER COLLECTIVE
RUEHGG/UN SECURITY COUNCIL COLLECTIVE
RUEHBY/AMEMBASSY CANBERRA 1087
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 4635
RUEHUL/AMEMBASSY SEOUL 8175
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 5736
RUEHCHI/AMCONSUL CHIANG MAI 1525
RHHMUNA/CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 1490
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 RANGOON 000292

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DEPT FOR EAP/MLS, DRL, AND IO
PACOM FOR FPA

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [BM](#)

SUBJECT: BURMA'S SENIOR GENERAL REPORTEDLY SICK AND
INCREASINGLY ISOLATED

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Classified By: P/E Chief Leslie Hayden for Reasons 1.4 (b) & (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: Sources tell us Than Shwe is displaying increasingly erratic behavior, but remains firmly in power and in control. He is single-handedly calling the shots regarding the upcoming constitutional referendum and the next steps of the roadmap, including the parliamentary election. Military factions in Nay Pyi Taw are becoming increasingly nervous about maintaining their positions and their power after 2010. A key source tells us that Aung San Suu Kyi and other key political activists will not be released from prison until after the 2010 elections, to prevent them from successfully gaining a parliamentary majority. End summary.

¶2. (C) Phone Win, a businessman with close ties to many high-level regime generals, told us Than Shwe has displayed increasingly erratic behavior. However, he remained firmly in control and was personally directing the implementation of the upcoming constitutional referendum and the next steps of the regime's "roadmap to democracy." Than Shwe's unwillingness to share or explain his vision, and his hastily-announced decision to end the constitution drafting and hold the referendum, have made the senior generals and bureaucrats who surround Than Shwe increasingly nervous about their place in Burma's political future, Phone Win elaborated.

¶3. (C) According to Phone Win, many of the top generals believe Than Shwe knows he has only a few years to live, and has dictated the timing of the referendum and elections to make sure a parliamentary government, overseen by the military, is in place before he dies. This would ensure another military dictator does not take over from Than Shwe and imprison his family, as Than Shwe himself did to former strong-man Ne Win's family, Phone Win explained. This was the motivation for the last-minute insertion of the amnesty provision in the draft constitution, he believed. Others, including the Thai Ambassador, believe a similar provision in Thailand's revised constitution served as the model.

¶4. (C) Phone Win said that Aung San Suu Kyi and other

prominent political prisoners would likely not be released until after the 2010 parliamentary election. USDA leaders would make sure they were not, Phone Win declared, because they were aware of Aung San Suu Kyi's popularity and wanted no one to emerge who could successfully organize the opposition to challenge them in the election. Another source inside the government claimed that, even after the 2010 elections, most of the cabinet ministers will be appointed by the military.

15. (C) Phone Win also told us Than Shwe was becoming increasingly distrustful of the generals beneath him and becoming more isolated. All information from the SPDC, ministers, and regional commanders was reported to third-ranking General Thura Shwe Mann, and only he was allowed access to Than Shwe and Maung Aye. Despite the enormous power accorded to him by this select access, Than Shwe reportedly keeps Shwe Mann on his toes by appointing his own loyalists throughout the military and the bureaucracy, often overruling the promotions Shwe Mann recommends.

16. (C) In a separate conversation, Singapore Ambassador Robert Chua told us Than Shwe has canceled several medical appointments he had scheduled in Singapore to follow-up the medical treatment he received in January 2007. Chua has also heard from Singapore businessmen that Than Shwe's behavior is increasingly bizarre and unexplainable, leading to speculation the senior general may have some form of dementia. Chua also noted that military factions in Nay Pyi Taw are increasingly nervous about the future, relaying that there is much speculation that Than Shwe has little time left to live.

17. (C) Chua also conveyed reports from the Singapore business community that new Secretary 1, Tin Aung Myint Oo, had a terrible temper and was hated throughout Nay Pyi Taw.

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Chua speculated that if Than Shwe were to go, Tin Aung Myint Oo would quickly be ousted. In contrast, Chua stated, the new Central Commander, based in Mandalay, Brigadier General Tin Ngwe, is young (43 years), smart, well-liked, and apparently uncorrupted. Singapore businessmen told Chua that he had refused several offers of elaborate gifts and expensive dinners most regional commanders expect. Chua also spoke well of Northeast Commander Brigadier General Aung Than Htut. In his opinion, the regional commanders are the best hope for eventual reform of Burma's military since the nature of their work makes them more aware of the economic and development problems Burma faces.

18. (C) Comment: While it is clear that Than Shwe is not in top form, there is no evidence he is about to drop dead. Uncertainty and paranoia are bound to surround any political transition, and Than Shwe's secrecy and isolation only increases this trend. In the absence of reliable information, rumors of impending coups and the senior general's death constantly circulate in Burma and in the exile community. While accounts of more progressive and engaging regional commanders give some hope that a leader could emerge to reform Burma's military in the future, this has an element of wishful thinking. We see no evidence that Than Shwe will willingly relinquish power. Rather, he appears determined to protect his power and his family's wealth. End Comment.

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